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A discussion of suggested techniques to be used by college department chairmen in handling teacher problems that develop annually during the second week of the semester, just before the release of the mid-semester grades, and prior to and following the final grading period, treats a number of real or imagined difficulties involving students in the classroom and grading disagreements with students, their parents, and other departments. (AF)

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THE THREATENED TEACHER SYNDROME

by Paul C. Sherr, Rider College

Proverbially, misery likes company. I presume that academia, especially in the shape of chairmen of departments of English, takes no exception with the comforting message of that adage. I shall take the liberty, therefore, of expanding my presumption into an assumption that you might like to have the company of my miseries. Professions, we know, tend to establish their own natures. Ours tends to push us toward schizophrenia as we try to be firm-handed fiscal geniuses when we deal with the administration and benevolent father figures when we deal with department members. In this brief paper, I would like to offer commiseration to chairmen who more than likely have to treat the underlying symptoms of what I call the Threatened Teacher Syndrome, and to suggest that the syndrome can be exploited to create unity and cooperation within the department. The symptoms are always present, being dormant most of the academic year; they become active at four moments during each semester: 1) during the second week of the semester, 2) just before mid-semester grades are due, 3) just prior to the final examination period, 4) just after the final grading period, this last bringing fewer patients, but the illness is more serious because it usually involves either parents, the administration, another department, or some combination of the three.

About the middle of the second week of each semester (students and teacher need about four or five class meetings to diagnose each other), the casual urgent (oxymoron) note appears in the "do" basket: "If you have a moment, I would like to stop by to discuss a small matter, today." Without the closing adverb, the note really means that the matter is small and discussable, like ordering books for the library or planning a visit to the eye doctor three months in advance, as one must do with eye doctors. With the adverb, the note means "now," and it deserves immediate attention. Usually, such concerns turn out to be founded.

The stopping-by starts in a number of ways, but ultimately, the opening sentence always reveals a rattled teacher; moreover, the style he uses to present his problem is a helpful indication of his basic nature and of the means by which the chairman can function: if quiet and inclined to the subjunctive, guide him and support him; if argumentative and firmly in the indicative, discuss the issue, support him, and guide him. Regardless of the approach, he needs to be reassured that nineteen other students like him. He likes them. They work together in a student/teacher relationship that operates as it should.

The opening handshake of reassurance over with, the discussion starts with one of the following:

"What would you do if...."	Guidance and support will do it
"What would you think if...."	" " " " " "
"Have you ever had...."	" " " " " "
"When I was a student...."	" " " " " "
"There is a student in my class...."	Discussion, support, and guidance
"I cannot stand snotty kids...."	" " " "
"I refuse to teach this student...."	" " " "
"I demand that this student be removed from my class...."	" " " "

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The issue itself is of secondary importance because it is really an agent, not a cause. It might be anything, but most common are the following; the remarks in parenthesis summarize possible suggestions:

"I returned his first theme with an 'F.' He brazenly threw it across my desk and told me that he got 'A's in all of his high school themes."
(That was last year and now he is in college)

"Do you know anything about the English department at Cambridge High School?"
(I understand that it is a high school department of English)

"This boy refuses to memorize the first fifteen lines of 'The Prologue.' I asked him why. He said it was junior high school stuff." (Note: not high school)
(No need to do anything but die. Course requirements incomplete. "F.")

"This student (sex not revealed) stares and stares at me. Never takes his eyes off me."
(He (she) is infatuated with you. Sorry, you are already spoken for)

"There's this fellow who sits in the rear of the room and looks out of the window all period."
(His privilege. His time, his money)

"There's this girl who keeps looking at herself in her mirror all the time."
(Her privilege. Her time, her money)

"No matter what I say, this boy puts up his hand and tells me that he disagrees with me."
(He proves that there is such a thing as opinion. Students are paying for yours. Suggest that he become a teacher)

Because most college teachers embody within their self-image a figment of intellectual superiority, they cannot afford the self-recognition that such an underling as a student is actually calling into question their capabilities. The truth is that they are threatened just as much by passivity (looking out of the window, making-up) as they are by passive aggression (the starer) and the openly aggressive (the thrower of themes, the disagreer). In final analysis, many if not all of the means for handling such situations come out during casual chats with peers in the coffee room or at a cocktail party. In emergencies, with the threatened teacher at hand, much can be accomplished by reassuring him and by giving him at least one, preferably two, tangibles to work with.

One suggestion that has helped teachers who are worrying through such a situation is to advise calling in the student for a conference. Frequently, students, engaged in testing the realities, do not know or would not admit knowing that a problem is extant, and in their anxiety to deny the existence of the problem, they solve it by being overly cautious about it and attentive to it. In addition, the proposals, indicated above in parenthesis, seem to help. It is worthwhile to emphasize that one possible course of action ultimately leads to a negative: bailing out the teacher. By so doing, he becomes overly dependent, which means one can never be shut of him until both parties agree to disagree.

The second wave of the epidemic comes about midway through the semester and is directly the result of the midterm balancing of books, the first real cumulative, comparative look at the class. Whereas the first sufferers are mostly young instructors, the second includes the young, mature and old; few teachers are completely free from the occasional grab for the medicine bottle. Opening discussion starts as follows:

"Have you ever had this fellow Haines in class?"

"Say, colleague, is this year's junior class the one we admitted a couple of years ago when enrollment was down all over the place? You know that year we dipped down into the '400's?"

"You know, I'm worried about this class. I'm afraid I'll have to send out eighteen blue slips out of twenty-five students."

"When, oh when, are these students going to learn to read the question?"

"Who taught that fellow Freshman Comp?"

"We've got to do something about this writing requirement."

As in symptom one, the issue is not the student, nor the poor crop of freshmen of three years past, nor the weak character of a given section (although it could be, for certain classes or sections do have a given tone), nor student ability to read or write, but simply the startling and threatening recognition that expectations are not being met, that goals will not be achieved, texts not furnished and others, perhaps, never opened, that test papers do not return, in any convincing way, what was given with careful professorial intensity and thorough preparation. Something must be wrong. Once again, the need to shift the burden of responsibility is great. Projection goes to students, to the class or to the nature of the work, for called into question now is not the relationship of one teacher to one student, but of one teacher to many students. As a result, his philosophy of education, of teaching, of learning, of discipline, of organization becomes momentarily suspect.

Immediately, the game of comparison commences. How many flunkies do you have? how many "F's," or "A's," or "C's?" Transcripts are subjected to the surgeon's scalpel; SAT and College Board scores, I.Q.'s, and cumulative averages sponge up some of the free-flowing blood of anguish, an anguish, thank the Lord, that does not gush too long. Once reassured by some means or another that his plight is not too different from his peers', the teacher settles back for the final six weeks of the semester which is just about enough time for the chairman to prepare himself for the next epidemic.

Whereas the first illness appears to be totally subjective, this second seems to be totally objective, but from any point of view, it is precisely another bite by the same bug: insecurity. No misunderstanding, please! This problem is not unique to the teaching profession, but some of the weight can be lifted from the chairman's loaded back if he realizes that the Threatened Teacher Syndrome is identifiable and repetitive. Dealing with the second requires a little different

approach. For the first, keep matters confidential between the teacher and the chairman. For the second, casually arrange chance discussions among small groups within the department, making sure that the matter does come up for discussion. As the exchange of experiences and views grows, wander off. Another approach is to regale the group with a personal anecdote which has for its heart, the matter at hand. Finishing the tale, manage to "wonder" if any one of "you" has had a similar experience. In short, symptom two being a group problem, the solution is best worked out within a group. By talking over the problem in a form of group therapy, everyone can share the problem either actively by engaging in the conversations or tacitly by digesting the remarks of the others, whether from ebullient intern or the seasoned staff member. Misery loves company. One is repeatedly comforted to know that many of the problems are created by the nature of the game.

The third onslaught is quite the same as the second; that is, the concern is for the number of high grades or low grades about to be given or earned by a given section. The symptom indicates again the threat which the teacher feels as to his ability to evaluate students. Two items, one internal, one external, alter the nature of the third symptom: 1) the discovery that a good, a famous (?), bright, highly touted student is about to earn a "C" instead of his usual "A," 2) a recollection or scuttlebut that the administration studies grading profiles. As in wave two, the members may be the young, the mature or the old. For the young, the questioning has something to do with a need to be "doing it the right way;" for the mature, a realistic need to keep an eye on salary increments and promotion; for the old, a sincere attempt to keep abreast of changes in administrative policy. Department members who question and recheck final grades are intelligently attacking a complicated process. Grading is difficult for many reasons, only a few of which have been mentioned here, but chairmen can use the Threatened Teacher Syndrome as an effective tool to improve the quality of teaching and grading in the department. It should be used as a device to bring people, staff members and chairmen, together to find operative answers to mutual questions. Having the members' insecurity initiate the coming together is a "good," not a "bad," for it means communication, discussion and sharing. The ever lurking danger is that the chairman will turn obviously intimate information to destructive rather than constructive ends.

In essence, use the same group procedures in three that effect a cure in two, but alter the attitude with one very strong statement which has a few emendations: Grade as you see fit, but always have immediately available that body of information, verbal or written, upon which you base your grade. No contention as to grades dissolves more quickly than that which is stacked up against eighteen cuts and test and quiz grades figured out in numbers rather than letters. Letter grades are vague, malleable. Some prefer grading systems which are loose. Numbers are preferable. They are hard, precise, exact. We tend to forget that most students do well. But few students present problems to the individual teacher, but those few, especially if one, or few, is persuasively emotional, can undo many a night's sleep, can bring the gall where the saliva ought to be. The argument for tangible evidence, with or without numbers, offers an extremely effective medication for the chairman and the teacher. Threatened teachers, who find support and win because they are right in their decisions, grow in their evaluation of themselves. Their self-image becomes firmer, clearer. They trust their judgment, as they should. They feel competent to advise students and

colleagues, to take part in and contribute to work done by committees.

Returning to the issues which make up symptom three, let us consider the following clarifications: As to the "A" student who is not going to earn his usual or now expected "A," point out first that some people work well for some, less for others; secondly, that we pay for results, not potential or reputation; thirdly, learning is much more than an end, so that by "grading it like it is" the teacher is helping the superman learn that some learnings and livings run smoothly, others, less so. As to the scrutinizing eye of the administration, few problems exist, so long as one has the evidence, preferably in numbers, as outlined above. No administration wants to deprive the "A" student his "A," nor does it want wholesale granting of degrees on the basis of harried, dishonest grading arising out of fear.

Symptom four is usually, but not always, started by a parent or a faculty member from another department within the institution who contacts the chairman with a complaint about a teacher. Started by a parent, the tangle is much more easily unsnarled than if instituted by a colleague who, frequently, if not always, is an adviser or another chairman, concerned about one of his majors. Most such complaints are about a teacher's teaching or grading and they compound the Threatened Teacher Syndrome, for in effect, either parent, the adviser, the chairman, or any combination of them is threatened for reasons so unfathomable that they are better off left lying in a heap. Their result, however, cannot be abandoned. At stake frequently is the dignity and the authority of the department of English to handle its internal problems. When such situations do arise, fortunately they do so infrequently, one is forever grateful to the teacher whose records are intact, for they mean that we have immediately escaped from the glorious hodge/mash of "he said," "I meant," "you did not," "I'm not that illiterate," and so on to oblivion.

Such matters, if not handled at the department level, must proceed upstairs, meaning the dean, a vice-president, and if the children of alumni are involved, even the president. Let it not be forgotten that we are dealing here with matters much bigger than the individual case in point; among other matters, the entire department stands directly to the rear of the teacher involved. What, for example, they ask, will the boss do for us when the chips are down? Is he afraid? (Am I actually a victim of my own delineated syndrome?) Will a struggle with the dean affect pay raises for the department, promotions, tenure, sabbaticals? Will the budget for the department be frozen or even cut? One ground rule works and will always be effective: the issue of the student's performance must never, never, never be permitted anywhere but on stage, front, dead center. Of absolutely no consequence are his previous college record, his emotional life (love or family relationships), his political views, his financial position, the proposed date of his graduation, his military obligations, his acceptance to graduate school, or any of a multitude of others which are all true, all valid, all pertinent, all involved with the brotherhood of man, of compassion, but which have nothing to do with the issue at hand: according to the lights of his teacher, he failed the course or failed to earn the grade he thinks he should have, or which others think he should have.

Strangely, the most difficult person to handle in such a situation which really goes down to the wire is the teacher himself. As the pressure grows, he grows

increasingly reluctant to commit himself. Exactly what he wants is difficult to establish. It is so because he is not sure, bringing us back to the Threatened Teacher Syndrome. He wants his grade to stand, but he is uncertain that it is valid. He wants the chairman to back him, but he fears that he has backed the chairman out on a limb in defense of something that he is not at all certain of. He wonders why on earth he did not give the grade the student told him he needed, wanted or hoped for, because he knew somewhere deep down inside that this matter would come out just as it has. He sees himself as kind of martyr who did what his peers wanted to do but did not have enough courage to do, and he half way believes that his peers are right and that he is wrong. Regardless of his uncertainty, the issue is potentially more explosive than the three mentioned earlier. It is so because it is the only one of the four with enough force behind it to move it out of the confines of the department. What is required is a firm stand based upon an honest, careful evaluation of the grade which is agreed to by chairman and teacher. Then, avoiding the pitfalls of emotion--especially tears--the chairman can support his staff with conviction, creating a tone within the department which leads to cooperation and creativity and which eases the tension that arises when one needs to take up such extra-curricular activities as service on committees.

In conclusion, might I confess to a feeling that all chairmen know all that I have said and that many chairmen will openly resent my efforts at telling them how to solve such "obvious" problems. Have you heard about the "Threatened Chairman Chindrome?"

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